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When attempting to explain that Jesus returned at the fall of the Old World of Judaism in 70 AD, one of the first objections offered is Revelation 1:7, "Behold, he cometh with the clouds and every eye shall see him, and they also that pierced him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him." One detractor challenged this scribe: "Did every eye see him (Christ) in 70 A.D.? Did your eye see him? I know my eye did not see him in 70 A.D.." Such objections are to be expected when a person has deep-seated traditional concepts about the coming of Jesus. We must be prepared to show these ideas to be Biblically untenable. Let us examine this passage in its context and seek to discover its true significance.

Historical Background

It seems to have escaped the notice of those who offer Revelation 1:7 as proof of a yet future coming of Jesus that this verse is taken directly out of the book of Zechariah; and as we shall see Jesus also uses this verse in the great eschatological discourse of Matthew 24. Surely the Bible student will want to be fully aware of how the verse is used in those contexts.

In Zechariah 12:10 the Spirit is speaking of a time which he designated as "in that day." This little term is used extensively by the prophet and is a limiting factor for everything which he discusses. Some of the "in that day" statements are confessedly enigmatic; but enough of them are sufficiently specific as to subject or time that there can be no misunderstanding.

"In that day" was to be when God would "break my covenant made with all the people" 11:7-11. This is undeniably when the Old Covenant would pass.

"In that day" would be "when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and Jerusalem" 12:1.
"In that day would be when "there shall be great mourning in Jerusalem," 12:11.
"In that day" would be when "there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David...for sin and for uncleanness," 13:1.
"In that day" would be when God would "cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land," 13:2.
"In that day" would be when the shepherd would be smitten and the sheep scattered, 13:6-7.
"In that day" would be when only a remnant would be saved, 13:8.
"In that day" would be when God would "gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle," 14:2.
"In that day" "living waters would go out from Jerusalem," 14:8.
"In that day" there would be only one God and one Lord, 14:9.

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Now in the same "in that day" when all the above was to happen we are told "they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him...," 12:10; and this is the very foundation of the citation in Revelation 1:7! Is it not patent that all the above; the betrayal of the shepherd, the fountain for sin, the cessation of miraculous gifts and demonic possession, the coronation of the one Lord; and the siege of Jerusalem all happened in one generation? How then can one divorce the appearance of the Messiah, when they would look on him whom they had pierced, from that same fateful generation?

Interestingly, John the author of Revelation used Zechariah 12:10 on another occasion. In John 19:37 as Jesus hung on the cross the Lord's favorite apostle records the event as fulfillment of Zechariah's words. This application of a single prediction to two events is not unknown in scripture.

The prophecy of Psalm 2:7 is cited several times in scripture. It is used in Acts 13:33 of Jesus' resurrection; in Hebrews 1:5 seemingly of when he entered the world, possibly at his baptism. See Luke 3:22; and in Hebrews 5:5 to speak of Jesus' priesthood. Thus it is not unknown for the inspired writers to apply a single prediction to two separate events but with a somewhat connected idea in mind.

For John Zechariah 12:10 was applicable to Jesus' crucifixion; but it would receive final fulfillment when "all the tribes of the earth" would mourn when they looked on him whom they had pierced. To John this would be when Jesus returned in the clouds of glory.

Jesus and Zechariah 12:10

As shown Zechariah 12:10 is the background for Revelation 1:7 and the context demands the event be in the first century generation. But our Lord also employed the language of Zechariah/Revelation in such a way that all controversy as to WHEN it would happen should be dispelled. In the famous apocalypse of Matthew 24 our Lord predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. Among amillenialists there is a consensus that all verses of chapter 24 prior to verse 36 are referent to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70. A good representation of the amillenial view is Roy Deaver's little tract, "Premillenialism: Matthew 24 and 25 Do Not Teach It."

In Matthew 24:29-31 Jesus adopts the classical style of Jewish apocalyptic literature in describing the fall of the Theocracy. In verse 30 Messiah quotes Zechariah 12:10 as occurring when the Son of Man would be seen "coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." Now notice the emphatic time statements.

In verse 32 Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. When the predicted events began to be seen by the apostles and disciples they were to "know it is near, even at the doors." He then avers in positive terms, "Verily, I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, until all these things shall be fulfilled" v.34. Our Lord has specifically told us when he would come with the clouds, cf. Rev.1:7, when he would be seen by all those who pierced him. It would be in his generation.

In confirmation of the time frame of his coming with the clouds in judgment one needs to examine Matthew 16:27-28 and compare Revelation 22:12. There is absolute harmony and unity between all these verses. In Matthew 16:27-28 Jesus promised to return in judgment with the angels in the lifetime of his disciples. In Matthew 24 he promised to come and be seen by those who had pierced him and it was to be in that generation. In Revelation he would be seen by those who had pierced him and, "Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give to every man according as his work shall be," Rev.1:7; 22:12.

How can one objectively examine these texts and ignore the time frame so inextricably woven into the text? Upon what basis can one say that while Jesus in Matthew 24 cited Zechariah 12 as to be fulfilled at his return in Jerusalem's fall, that in Revelation, although it emphatically tells us it would shortly come to pass (I:I-3) it has not yet been fulfilled?

Reader, when did John, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, say the things of which he wrote would take place? Did he say they would not be fulfilled for many years? Did he say SOME of those things were "at hand" and "must shortly come to pass"? Can you not see the identical time frame in Revelation as in Matthew 24 and Zechariah 12?

Notice the correlation between the theme of the three texts. In Zechariah we are dealing with a time when Jerusalem would be surrounded and besieged, 12:2,11; 13:8ff; 14:2. In Matthew 24 the subject is the destruction of Jerusalem, 24:1-3. In Revelation the theme is the destruction of the great city "where our Lord was crucified," 11:8. In all three texts you have the coming of the Lord, Zech.14:3-5; Matthew 24:29-31; Revelation 1:7. In each of the texts those who pierced him would see him, Zechariah 12:10, Matthew 24:30, Revelation 1:7. And of course at the risk of being repetitious all three events were set in a specific time frame "in that day." Zech.12; "this generation shall not pass away," Matthew 24:34; and "the time is at hand," Rev.1:3.

A Related Passage

It is important to note a passage which is related to the Zechariah 12/Revelation 1 texts.

As Jesus stood before Caiaphas the high priest implored him to dispel their doubts and tell them if he was indeed Messiah. Jesus' response is important to the study of Revelation 1:7,"Thou hast said: Nevertheless, I say unto you, Here after shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven."

In this passage we have the identical elements as in Revelation 1:7. In Revelation we are told that those who pierced him would see him. In Matthew Caiaphas, one of the chief instigators of Jesus' crucifixion is told he would witness Jesus' return. In Revelation the Lord was to return with the clouds. In Matthew Jesus promised to return in the clouds. In Matthew Caiaphas is told he would personally witness the return; in Revelation the event was"at hand" and "Behold,I come quickly."

Just a word here about the coming in the clouds. The mind set which demands a literal return on the physical clouds needs further study in the Biblical usage of the concept.

Clouds are depicted as the"chariots of God" and indicative of his MAJESTY. In Job 22:12ff Job exalts Jehovah as the one who is in the height of heaven and covered with thick clouds. In Psalm 18 which is a highly apocalyptic description of David's deliverance from Saul the former shepherd tells how Jehovah "bowed the heavens...and came down with darkness under his feet, he rode upon a cherub, and flew; He flew upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness His secret place; His canopy around Him was dark waters and thick clouds of the skies." Now one can look but in vain to find a physical event matching these words. Jehovah had acted to deliver his servant and thus he had come. He had acted and his actions had vindicated his righteousness, thus he was depicted as coming in majesty in the clouds. Psalm 68:32-35 also speaks of God who "rides on the heaven of heavens" and "his strength is in the clouds." Again the concept is his majesty and sovereignty. Psalms 104:3 tells us God "makes the clouds his chariots" and "walks on the wings of the wind."

The idea of God's coming in the clouds is also associated with the exercise of his sovereignty in JUDGING his enemies. In Isaiah 19 Jehovah "rides on a swift cloud and will come into Egypt." We know from chapter 20 that it was the Assyrians who were God's instrument of wrath on Egypt, see Isaiah 20:1-4; yet it is said that Jehovah was coming on a cloud. In Zephaniah 1:14-16 we are told the "great day of the Lord is near;" and that it would be a day of "wrath," "distress," and a "day of clouds," when the Lord would come. We know this is a prediction of the impending judgment on Jerusalem, 1:4ff. This judgment came in 606-586 BC. Similar language is found in Nahum in the prediction of Nineveh's fall. Jehovah "has his way in the whirlwind...and the clouds are the dust of his feet." El Shaddai would come, the mountains would melt, the earth would be destroyed at his presence when he came on the clouds. We know that Nineveh was destroyed, not by a literal coming of Jehovah out of heaven on the clouds, but by the invading armies of the Chaldeans and Medes in approximately 612 BC. Homer Hailey's book, A Commentary on the Minor Prophets, is a good commentary to study.

Yet another though related concept of the coming with the clouds is the Messianic motif of Daniel. In Daniel 7 one like the Son of man is depicted as coming in the clouds of heaven. This concept of Messiah on the clouds was certainly one well known in the first century. For John to say in Revelation 1:7 that Jesus would come with the clouds was nothing less than an assertion of his Messianic role as the ruler of the kingdom of God. In his coming in the clouds he was exercising the sovereignty and demonstrating the majesty of deity so well known in the Old Covenant. The idea is not a literal coming with the clouds so much as an identifying factor of the one under consideration. He is to be viewed not just as man but the One, who, like Jehovah, rides on the clouds. The association of Jesus coming in the clouds then was a way for the Biblical writers to IDENTIFY Jesus, in a manner well known to those conversant with Old Testament symbolism, as God's Messiah, as the Judge, worthy of majesty and honor.

This is precisely the thought Jesus was conveying to Caiaphas when he told him he would see him coming in the clouds. When Jesus said he was going to come in the clouds this was a claim to the Messianic office and divine nature; Caiaphas responded, "He has spoken blasphemy!" Caiaphas was not responding to a claim that Jesus would literally return on a physical cloud. He was responding to the IDENTITY which Jesus was claiming by associating himself as the one to come in the clouds of heaven!

One final thought. We would note the New Testament TIME FRAME for the coming of Jesus in the clouds. Patently Jesus told Caiaphas he would see Jesus' return in the clouds. He did not say he would die and millenia later be resurrected to view the parousia. He was living and was told he would witness Jesus' return, which we hope is now understood to be the exercise of his Messianic sovereignty by an act of judgment.

In Matthew 24:30-34 we are told emphatically that the disciples' generation would see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven. Reader, how can the honest student of the word ignore such emphatic chronological parameters? How can we divorce Revelation 1:7 and the promise of the coming in the clouds, from Revelation 1:1-3 and the prediction it "must shortly come to pass" and was "at hand"?

Summary: We have attempted to demonstrate that Revelation 1:7 has three distinct concepts behind it which mitigate against a futuristic interpretation. First, the Old Covenant backgound as applied by Jesus in Matthew 24 to the destruction of Jerusalem. Second, the coming in the clouds as an identifying factor. The one coming in the clouds was to be associated with sovereignty, majesty, and judgment. A literal coming was not envisioned. Thirdly, the emphatic time limitations of the text. John's vision was to "shortly come to pass"; Jesus said he was coming "quickly," 22:12.

It is strange indeed that such a literalistic interpretation has been imposed on Revelation 1:7 when this violates not only the symbolic context of Revelation but the inspired interpretation (Matthew 24:30-34) of the source of the verse (Zechariah 12:10.) Let us be more careful students of the Word.

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